

Integrating teaching and learning in graduate studies: economic development course

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1. Introduction

Within economics, growth and development economics is probably the fastest-growing and most dynamic field. The course allows students to apply their analytical and econometric skills to what are some of the most pressing issues in the world.

Educational shifts are dynamic, diverse and non-linear. Especially so now, as the world appears to be moving rapidly due to technological advances and increased interconnectedness between countries and cultures, given the persistence (or even increasing) of differences in educational results within nations, races, and disparities in privilege. Is academia shifting away from the traditional learning and on to the new-age learning?

However, teachers/professors/educators are at the center of school education activities. Popular resources for knowledge, as the internet, may help and have important effects on teaching practices, yet, students need a point of reference in order to maximize their knowledge better.

In today's age, students are focusing more on hands-on skills, or finding information themselves, in order to boost their knowledge so they can later use in their lives. Thus, universities are adapting to the market as more than 20 reports express concerns about an unprepared workforce [1]. Therefore, the challenge for educators is to explain the skills and switch from broad statements of intent to more detailed discussions on educational practice. But what is the right form and organization of a "splendid" course that might increase the interest of students and at the same time serve as a good impulse to drive the economic growth and development in real life? The aim of this paper is to present concretely the work, done so far in this aspect, and how this course drives to better absorbed 21st century skills.

2. Materials and Methods

Some studies [2] stated that economics may be dominated by people who do mathematics and statistics and do not understand economy, thus the distance from economics to realisticness may be growing. Another study [3] supported the same view, and showed that the reason why some students do not choose to study economics, is the reason of precepting economics as "too mathematical". Hence, as an important task to the teachers of economy, should be the disclosure of economy to a real-life applied subject. As such, through all these years, the main aim of the Development and Growth Course, conducted at Epoka University, has been to bring the economic concepts to concrete cases and significantly contribute to the sustainable development goals of economy.

INTEGRATING TEACHING AND LEARNING IN GRADUATE STUDIES: ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT COURSE

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Abstract: Development economics is a field of study, trying to explore the reason of economic success and failures of different countries or regions in the world. It deals with important issues and gaps of 21st Century, such as poverty, inequality, education, health, demographic changes, migration, trade and globalization. Moreover, the basic issues of development economics have been in focus since 1776 within the famous book of Adam Smith "An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations". Development economics, it can be argued, has to be concerned not only with protecting its "own" territory, but also with keeping alive the foundational motivation of the subject of economics in general.

All the above-mentioned aspects on development economics are the main motivation of this paper. Furthermore, this study tries to analyze, synthesize and recapitulate the integration of teaching and learning in graduate studies. It is the case of an actual course, termed "Development and Growth", offered in the economics department of the Master of Science program. The study will cover two main analyses: the first analysis, dealing with the specifics of course organization and management and the second one, exploring the students' projects and their integration with the course.

Keywords: teaching methodology, skills, learning outcomes, development and growth course, students' projects.

Concretely, what are these skills to be taught to these students? How do they apply to teaching? A research [4] shows that individuals study and apply large knowledge and skills of the 21st century within the framework of different information organizations. Following are examples of 21st century skills:

– **Adaptability** – The capacity and willingness on the job to deal with unpredictable, unfamiliar and rapidly changing circumstances, including successful responses to emergencies or crisis situations and learning new roles, technologies and procedures. Adaptability also includes work-stress management; adaptation to different personalities, communication styles and cultures [5].

– **Complex communications/ Social skills** – Competencies in the processing and interpretation of verbal and non-verbal information from others so as to respond appropriately [6].

– **Non-routine problem solving** – A skilled problem-solver uses strategic analysis to analyze a wide variety of knowledge, identify patterns, and refine the knowledge to arrive at a problem diagnosis. Going beyond a diagnosis to a solution includes understanding of how the information is conceptually related and involves metacognition — the ability to focus on how a problem-solving strategy works and turn to a new strategy if the current strategy does not work [6].

– **Self-management/development** – Self-management skills include the ability to work remotely in virtual teams; to work independently; and to be self-motivating and self-monitoring. One component of self-management is the ability and the capacity to learn new work-related knowledge and skills [7].

– **System thinking** – The ability to consider how a whole system operates, how an event, shift, or failure in one part of the system affects the rest of the system; taking on a "big picture" outlook on a work [7]. It includes judgment and decision making; interpretation of frameworks; and assessment of processes as well as logical thinking about how the various elements of a work process interact [8].

Students should be shaped in such way that not only has the strong work-ethic and is a good reader but has also broad vocabulary and sufficient background. According to the cognitive scientist [9], the more you know, the easier it is to learn new things by reading about them. Knowledge of the subject matter and basic skills are important building blocks for the value-gaining competencies of the 21st century. Being able to critically think about a subject or solve a problem in a given domain needs adequate background information about it. And an important aspect of creativity is connecting across knowledge domains – something that is impossible unless someone

knows enough in different domains to make a connection like that [10]. According to some other authors [11], “critical thinking outcomes” are influenced by knowledge and experience, but they are also influencing an individual’s critical thinking skill and critical thinking disposition. In support of that, students must learn to think and reason critically to reach their fullest potential [12].

Since creativity and adaptability are key components that are crucially needed for students to develop more in terms of both professional skills and academic skills, the Development and Growth Class prepares graduates for the adapting and evolving positions they are supposed to play in their professional lives, in academia or elsewhere through the projects they have undertaken.

This study is based in two other previous works. The first study [13] explained the course’s focus which lies into two main elements; the primary target of the course is to train students with critical thinking/improving their skills toward the adoption in the new century, and the second one is the understanding of the sustainable development/the identification of obstacles regarding this issue and the application of appropriate solutions for problem disposition. Whereas the second study [14] explored the evidences of the link between the economic growth and development outcomes by having concrete projects, developed by students.

The aim of this paper is to reevaluate the course of development and growth, taught at graduate studies of the economics program and to make some comparisons on the topics, developed through time under the same course.

3. Results

Table 1 displays all the project topics, applied for years 2014 and 2019/2020. As seen there are similar topics, but again there are some differences. For example, what is seen as an important focus is the attention on the environmental aspects. For a general view-point in 2014, where the focus was in general lines

such as clean the environment and be aware of it, these last two years, 2019/2020, the focus is much deeper. The trend now is in the same line with the European focus, using the concepts of recycling, thus “with less achieving more”, and the minimization of costs and inputs. This is in the same line with the sustainable development goals that target the continuance of stable solutions of economy.

Evaluating the social dimension, it could be emphasized, that this one has had some significant shifts. For example, in 2014 the topics were focused on poverty reduction, enhancing living standards and increasing social connection and labor market opportunities. Whereas in 2019/2020, the focus is more on people in need, especially for two categories, orphans and elder people living in asylum. Given that the number of students working for such projects is relatively high, it might come to some conclusions that they see these cases as important to give their contribution. In addition, another aspect, seen as an area to be contributed, is the gender gap and the assistance toward its convergence. Lastly, the students see as an emergency the online teaching and the required skills toward it, given that the whole world is suffering from Covid-19. The adaptation with the remote teaching and learning is considered a challenge, thus the students have applied such project in accordance with some school teachers and pupils.

The economic dimension of sustainable development seems to be in parallel lines within the years. The agricultural sector has been seen as important to be supported, and it remains the same even after 5 years. This means that the agriculture sector is important for Albania, but not only. Another important aspect is the entrepreneurial spirit to be boosted. This would give some highly satisfied impact on the business sides and overall economy.

In addition, all these projects are explicitly covered in **Table 2**, in which they display the specific cross-cuts aspects with the sustainable development dimensions.

Table 1
Dimensions of sustainable development and students’ project topics

Sustainable Development Dimensions	Project Topics in 2014	Project Topics in 2019/2020
Economic Dimension	1 – Economic Empowerment of Women as Farmers; 2 – Dhurata.com Website, Innovative and Business Development; 3 – Improving the process of collecting milk from farmers; 4 – Made4 Impact.	1 – Entrepreneurial Roadmap Workshop; 2 – Raising awareness of economic issues at a students’ club; 3 – Promoting the Tourism Sector of Albania; 4 – Agricultural solidarity and coordination group.
Social Dimension	1 – Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger; 2 – Eat Well, Move More, Live longer; 3 – Alumni Association Formation: A guide for Epoka University.	1 – Gender Equality in Albania: An approach to social, cultural, and financial matters; 2 – Assisting toddlers’ development; learning through play; 3 – A “Sharing mean Caring” Journey Contribution to Orphan’s Lives; 4 – To care for those who once cared about us, is one of the highest honors; 5 – Bringing Joy to Orphans; 6 – Helping school children with IT skills and online courses.
Environmental Dimension	1 – Ensure Environmental Sustainability by Painting Trees with the Motto “All of us, for a Cleaner Environment”.	1 – Water Pollution Awareness Project in Devoll Valley; 2 – “Reduce, Reuse, Recycle” Saving our earth.

Source: Authors’ work

Table 2
Coverage of specific areas of Sustainable Development dimensions

Economic Dimension	Social Dimension	Environmental Dimension
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Continuous improvement in economic well-being (2014, 2019/2020) * Creation of new markets and opportunities for sales growth (2014, 2019/2020) * Cost reduction through efficiency improvements (2014) * Greater economic equality (2014) * Efficient use of renewable resources * Protection of commercial rights (2014) * Green business opportunities (2014) * Sharing of commercial information (2014) * Opportunities for reduced energy and raw material input * Fair and equal access to information and knowledge (2014, 2019/2020) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Protection of human rights * Protection of human health (2014, 2019/2020) * Child mortality * Food security (2014, 2019/2020) * Sharing of vital information (2014, 2019/2020) * Respecting the viewpoints of beneficiaries and victims of developmental activities * Accountability and responsibility of societal decision makers (2019/2020) * Participatory approach in decision making (2014, 2019/2020) * Increasing literacy levels and employment opportunities (2014, 2019/2020) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Renewal of energy (2019/2020) * Renewal of materials (2019/2020) * Renewable food resources (2019/2020) * Reduction of environmental footprint (2019/2020) * Accountability and responsibility of environmental decision makers (2014, 2019/2020) * Environmental ethics (2014, 2019/2020)

Source: Authors' work

4. Discussions

The education system has to go through the deep analysis that has to do with the quality issues, but not only. Even though each nation has its own quality standards, these standards have a lot in common and in generally speaking they converged to each other in adopting the quality to carefully deliver high quality education in order to have a better generation with the high standard of education [15]. In addition, it is extremely important to make some analysis in program-based and course-based. These assessment forms would bring to the higher education institutions some valuable feedback which might be considered to improve the offered programs and courses. It is highly recommended the usage of specific surveys, such as that of ICES, used to measure the teacher performance in the economics program and the reliability and validity in their institutions [16].

This work tries to configure the applied method of the 21st century skills within a specific course, that of Develop-

ment and Growth. In addition, these applications in form of projects are displayed for the three dimensions of sustainable development, economic, social and environmental. The application of these projects would bring the students face-to-face with the concepts in the literature review, such as adaptability, complex communication and social skills, non-routine problem solving, self-management and development, and system thinking. This course lasts for two semesters. In the first one, students “discover” and analyze the big-data concepts, related to the economic development and growth in the world scale and comparison cases for different regions/countries. In the second semester they choose a specific topic to apply to societies, they find out to be in need for such a project. Hence, going through this class management structure, would ensure the 21st century skills to be absorbed by students and at the same time they would take advantages of improved capacity building, and real-life problem solving.

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